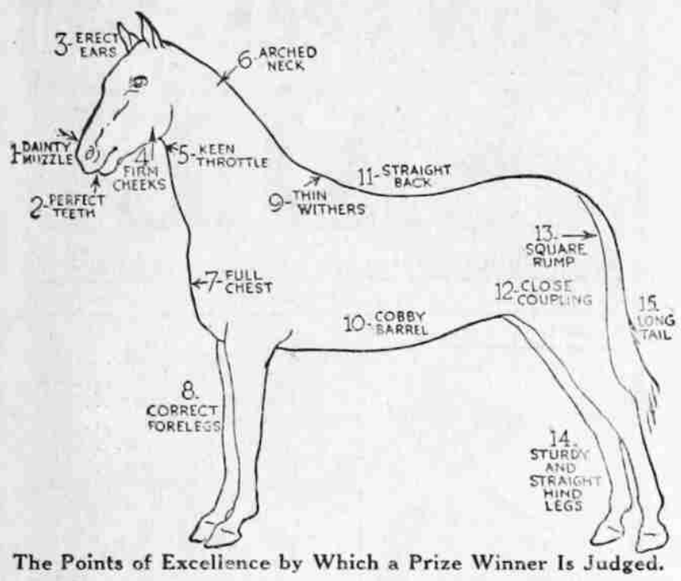
Mystery of the Strange Scandal of the Horse Show

Who Is Responsible for Imposing on Mr. Vanderbilt and the Other Judges with a Horse Masquerading Under False Pretenses Which Robbed "Chestnut Blossom" of the Prize It Deserved?



The Points of Excellence by Which a Prize Winner Is Judged.

IF there is any one fundamental upon which all "gentleman sport" is built it is that it shall be honest, straightforward and clean.

And yet, in the best-known and greatest event of the year, in the world of American fashionable sport—the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden—a first prize was won by fraud the other day.

Right in front of the eyes of Mr. Reginald Vanderbilt, who stood in the ring as the official in charge that Wednesday afternoon, a horse was entered in one of the prize competitions under a name not its own, in a class which it had no right to be in, pretending to be of an age which was false and disqualified it. And this little animal, masquerading as something which it was not, walked away with the blue ribbon, the first prize in the class, by trickery and misrepresentation.

The astonishing thing about it all is that this horse was entered from the stables owned by Mr. Samuel M. Vauclain, the multi-millionaire president of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, of Philadelphia, and his own granddaughter rode the animal, put it through its tricks and won the prize which it did not deserve and which was later stripped from it in disgrace.

There is more or less mystery surrounding this extraordinary event which marked the Horse Show with a scandal which has been the talk of the social world—and the end is not yet.

The public race tracks have always been notorious with gamblers' tricks. Many of the persons connected with the horses, the stables, the jockies and the betting ring were often professional crooks. And even the national sport of baseball has been invaded by crooked gamblers.

But one thing everybody believed remained clean; the honorable competitions on their merits of the exhibits from the stables of America's millionaires and great social leaders. It was upon this unquestioned belief that the arena boxes at Madison Square Garden were filled morning, afternoon and night during Horse Show week with the same men and women of wealth and fashion who adorn the famous horse shoe of boxes at the opera. It was not supposed that there would be any more likelihood of trickery or dishonesty in the Madison Square Garden arena than there would be likelihood of Mrs. Vanderbilt's stealing Mrs. Astor's jewels at the opera.

The catalogue announced:

"Class 148—Ponies under saddle to be judged at 2:30 p. m., Wednesday. Ponies, mares or geldings, 12 hands and not exceeding 13.2, four years old or over. First prize, $50; second prize, $25."

There were fifteen horses entered in this competition. The last one on the list was entered from the Broadlawn Stable under the name of "Little Fire Lady," four years.

On the pony's back sat Miss Patricia Vauclain, grand-daughter of Samuel M. Vauclain, owner of the horse.

But "Little Fire Lady" was none other than a two-year-old filly, whose real name was Mystery, one of Miss Patricia's pets. Little Fire Lady was what is known as a "ringer"—an old race-track gambler's phrase.

When rumors of the fraud crept round the Garden and reached the ears of the officials of the Horse Show, an investigation was immediately made and Patrick O'Connell, master of the Vauclain Stables, was summoned and the evidence was discovered of the trick. The prize was withdrawn and awarded to Chestnut Blossom, owned by Mrs. F. P. Garvan.

Who entered the two-year-old Mystery under the name of Little Fire Lady as a four-year-old?

Was it to win the $50 prize money and perhaps some heavy betting? O'Connell, the head of the stables, said it was "a mistake."

Who else besides O'Connell was a party to the trick? Horse Show officials, for the sake of the good name of their annual competition, mean to follow this thing to the end.

The officials of the Horse Show sent this not very pleasant letter to the Broadlawn Stables:

"It has been brought to our notice that your pony, Little Fire Lady, entered as a four-year-old, was shown in Classes 148 and 151 and awarded the blue ribbon in both classes. Investigation shows that this animal was less than four years old and therefore not eligible. We beg to inform you that our executive committee has decided to withdraw these blue ribbons and prizes and not allow this pony to be shown in any other class at the show and to bring the matter to the attention of the other exhibitors in the classes in which the pony was entered. Furthermore, the matter will be laid before the Association of American Horse Shows."

This is not the first time the Vauclain horses have stirred up trouble. For a half dozen years or more horses from Broadlawn have been carrying off prizes in the fashionable shows in the name of the former Miss Constance Vauclain, little Miss Patricia's aunt, who was married last June to William H. Hamilton, a bank clerk. "Connie," as she was familiarly known, was the owner of a "million-dollar stable" when but eighteen years of age.

An interesting episode is in the official records of the famous Devon Horse Show for the year 1916, when Constance Vauclain flew into a fit of rage because one of her horses, Lady Dilham, was awarded a red ribbon. Constance thought the mare was entitled to the blue and refused to accept the award made by the judges. Her remarks were so insulting that the executive committee notified her through her older sister, Miss Anne Vauclain, that if she did not apologize all her entrants would be barred from further participation in the show. Here is the official statement of the incident made public at the time by William T. Hunter, chairman of the Executive Committee for the Devon Horse Show:

"Of course, the Devon Horse Show Association could not allow Miss Vauclain's action to go unnoticed. Almost as soon as she left the ring the Ladies' Day Ring Committee went into session. Miss Vauclain's horses were ordered out of the ring and barred from further showing. Mrs. Dobson Altemus, the chairman, was in charge. The committee did not side with Miss Vauclain and it would have gone hard with her.

"I went out to see Miss Vauclain, who was in tears over her defeat. I told her what she faced and advised her to go and correct matters. Finally she did so, apologizing to Miss Edith Harriman, of New York, the judge, and to Mrs. Altemus. Thus she accepted the red ribbon. The incident was most unfortunate."

Horse lovers in society also were stirred only last year by the success of a Vauclain horse, owned and entered by Constance, in one of the indoor shows at Philadelphia. It was the consensus of opinion that an entry by Miss Isabella Wanamaker was far and away the superior of the Vauclain horse. Instances are numerous of arguments between Constance and the judges over awards that did not place her entries in the blue-ribbon class.

When Constance married young Hamilton last June she decided to withdraw from horse showing. She sold out her stable in August.

In the meantime the Vauclain name has been kept before the horse-loving public through little Miss Patricia, who is a mere child. She has been showing the horses not disposed of by Constance, some of which were brought for Patricia by her indulgent grandfather, the president of the Baldwin Locomotive Works. Philadelphia competitors verify the statement of Samuel M. Vauclain that he takes virtually no interest in the stables other than to sign whatever checks are necessary.

When the action of the judges in Madison Square Garden, in exposing the Vauclain "ringer," was called to Mr. Vauclain's attention he declined at first to discuss the matter.

"I do not know anything about the incident other than what I have seen in the newspapers," said Mr. Vauclain. "I am not interested."

"Who made the entries for the National Horse Show from your stables?" Vauclain was asked.

"They were made by O'Connell. He has been doing it for a number of years and I assume that he knows his business. I suppose he made a mistake."

"Haven't you asked him for an explanation?"

"Certainly not. Why should I? I am not interested in the matter. I see no reason to take any action in the matter."

"But the charge has been made that a ringer was introduced—that he attempted to win by crookedness. Are you going to investigate that?"

"No. I do not believe that anything crooked has been attempted. What is more likely is that the trainer may have made a mistake. I have not asked for O'Connell's resignation and I have no intention of doing anything of the kind."

Once before the Horse Show was imposed upon, but on that occasion the trick was played by a practical joker, who had bet that it was easy to fool the judges, and the joker was prompt in revealing the trick. Brian G. Hughes, one of the most monumental jesters that this country has ever known, and certainly the peer of any New York joker of all time, was the author of the trick.

In the days when electricity was supplanting the horse cars on the streets of New York, "B. G.," as he was called, was intimately connected with the Horse Show. With the keen mind that saw the humorous aspect of irreverence, he realized that horse-show judges, however expert, are nothing more than human. And it occurred to him that it would be a fitting addition to the gaiety of nations to show up the grave and learned judges of horse flesh.

So B. G. bought a horse that was no longer fit to pull a Metropolitan street car, even—bought it as it was being led to the slaughter, for $11.50. He shipped the bag of bones to Brightsides, his country place, with these instructions to the coachman:

"You take this horse, and groom him, and feed him, and massage him, and manicure him and bathe him, and coddle him as though he were destined for Caligula's stables, to feed on gilded oats. When he is fairly rearing and snorting with condition, break him to saddle."

It was done. The ex-car horse waxed fat and spirited. Miss Clara Hughes, B. G.'s daughter, rode the renovated steed daily. And then came the Madison Square Horse Show.

B. G. secured the finest, most conspicuous stall. The stall was furnished with every luxury that had ever been lavished on a horse, and a few more besides. And over the door, in electric lights, was the name of his entry:

"Puldeka Orphan, by Metropolitan, out of Electricity."

Which name, spoken fast enough, should reveal many things about the Hughes entry. Evidently the New Yorkers of that day did not speak very fast.

For thousands of visitors trooped past the stall, with its liveried grooms standing guard, and horse-wise people declared that an unknown saddle horse was about to sweep in all the honors in its class.

Puldeka Orphan competed with at least twenty other horses—aristocrats all—on the second day of the show. Miss Hughes rode him, and controlled him, it is said, by means of a bell under the saddle. When she wanted him to go she rang the bell twice. To stop, she rang the bell once.

And it was the bell that kept Puldeka Orphan from winning. Most of his rivals had been given the gate when the judges heard the bell. They discovered that without the old familiar car signal Puldeka would not perform. And in their excitement they must have said the name fast.

However that may be, it was admitted at the time that it was not their knowledge of horseflesh that discovered Puldeka's ignoble lineage and previous condition of servitude.

But that was only a joke, and no one took it seriously and no one was injured—unless it was a learned judge or two. In the present instance the intent seems to have been more serious, and the whole incident cannot be classed as a joke—even a joke on the judges.

The question that arises in the layman's mind at once is: How could the Broadlawn Stables fool the judges? If the difference in the ponies was so slight that Little Fire Lady passed for a four-year-old until the judges were told that she was younger, is not the whole matter merely a hair-splitting technicality, and shouldn't Patrick O'Connell, the trainer, be given credit for producing a youngster that could compete with and excel ponies in their prime? That question has nothing to do with the fraud.

Now, hackneys mature somewhat quickly. A two-year-old of this type is closer in conformation to a four-year-old than many other breeds would be. That fact helped fool the judges. Another thing was the perfect training which Little Fire Lady had received. This made her look like a veteran of the show ring rather than a novice.

Hackneys as a type are used in harness or under saddle—an all-round, utility breed. They were at the height of their popularity in England about seventy years ago, and were great horses for distance and endurance.

The ponies in Class 148, at the Garden, were judged on the usual basis of performance, manners and conformation. Performance was the most important thing; in a show of this class conformation is almost taken for granted. Performance means the quality of the horse's gait, in the main. A saddle pony must display an easy, flat-footed walk, neat and clean-cut, but not too mincing. Here Little Fire Lady excelled over Chestnut Blossom.

The latter had a dainty, high-stepping gait, with good knee action, but it was too nervous and staccato to beat that of the two-year-old.

Chestnut Blossom's trotting was rather more unequal than Little Fire Lady's.

Manners in a pony include gentleness, spirit and habits as displayed in the ring. Little Fire Lady showed plenty of spirit and dash, but was gentle, as befitting a child's mount, and when unsaddled stood quietly, with erect head and no signs of nervousness.

The points of conformation, roughly, are as indicated in the diagram printed above on this page.

Mr. Vauclain's Two-Year-Old "Mysterious" Who Masqueraded as a Four-Year-Old Under the Name of "Little Fire Lady." Miss Patricia Vauclain, Who Rode the Horse to Victory, Is Shown Standing Beside the Pony.

Mrs. Garvan's "Chestnut Blossom" with Master Garvan in the Saddle.

Miss Constance Vauclain (Now Mrs. William H. Hamilton), Who Has Always Been Greatly Interested in the Vauclain Horses.

Mr. Reginald Vanderbilt, Who Was in Charge of the Arena at the Time "Little Fire Lady" Imposed Upon the Judges.